Modernity's Paradox: Russia's War on the Future While Chasing It

Modern society increasingly resembles a vast trench system—not one built from mud and artillery, but from data flows, logistics networks, economic pressures, and the psychological demands of hyperconnected life. This trench is quiet but relentless. It consumes attention, labour,

and identity. It shapes behaviour more effectively than traditional authority ever could. Within this system, Russia under Vladimir Putin offers a particularly clear illustration of a deeper paradox: while the Kremlin claims to defend Russia from modernity's fluid, decentralised, networked forces, it simultaneously depends on high-modern systems—industry, technology, satellites, and

global logistics—to sustain that confrontation. It is a war on the future that can only be fought by accelerating the very future it rejects.

To understand this contradiction, it is necessary to trace the vectors driving Russia's current posture. Russia's defence spending has surged dramatically. According to SIPRI, military expenditure in 2024 reached approximately US$149 billion,

a 38% increase from 2023, amounting to 7.1% of GDP and 19% of total government spending (sipri.org). Another analysis places the budget at US$129 billion in 2024 and predicts up to US$145 billion for 2025, or roughly 6.3–7% of GDP (cepa.org). Reporting from Le Monde indicates that up to 40% of Russia's government spending in 2025 may be devoted to defence and security (lemonde.fr). These figures

demonstrate a shift toward a full-scale war economy—one deeply dependent on industrial output, technological infrastructure, and global resource networks.

Yet the state's ideological narrative presents this war as a reaction against modernity itself. The Kremlin frames liberal democracy, globalisation, digital culture, and identity pluralism as existential threats. It

promotes a worldview grounded in hierarchy, territorialism, and traditionalism. But this ideological vector is contradicted by the functional vector required to sustain the war. Russia cannot maintain a prolonged industrial conflict without advanced weaponry, precision targeting, drones, sensors, imported components, financial networks, and a deeply

modernised defence industry. The Kremlin must embrace what it publicly denounces.

The contradiction becomes even clearer when examining Russia's military-industrial capacity. Chatham House notes that Russia continues to rely heavily on Soviet-era systems and struggles to produce genuinely new, high-tech systems without access to foreign components (chathamhouse.org). The war

demands cutting-edge modernity; the ideology rejects it. Russia's reliance on foreign microelectronics, precision components, and commercially available drone technology reveals a dependence that directly contradicts official rhetoric.

The logic of trench society helps illuminate this paradox. In many countries, particularly in sectors like transport, healthcare, and

public infrastructure, ordinary workers function like noncommissioned officers of a vast megamachine. A bus driver, moving through a city, maintains an essential line of movement: holding schedules, navigating stress, absorbing unpredictable human behaviour, and keeping the machinery of everyday life operational. Their labour is indispensable yet undervalued. The system

depends on their endurance but offers little protection when they fall.

Russia's war machine operates on the same principle. Ordinary Russians provide the labour, the mobilisation, the endurance. The system demands continuous movement, continuous sacrifice, continuous output. The trench is psychological and economic. The ideology

demands loyalty; the machinery demands modernisation. The individual is caught between these forces, rarely benefiting from either.

This contradiction reveals something fundamental about Russia's geopolitical behaviour. The Kremlin attempts to wage an early 20th-century style war in a 21st-century environment. It invokes imperial nostalgia

while requiring cutting-edge logistics. It attacks the fluidity and complexity of networked societies while needing those same networks to survive sanctions, sustain production, and wage information warfare. The result is a structural paradox: the state must modernise to maintain a conflict justified as a rejection of modernity.

Analysts note that Russia's

military remains far from the ideal of a high-tech force despite enormous spending (nestcentre.org). According to CEPA, the Kremlin's discourse increasingly reflects an awareness that the war cannot be won without further technological acceleration, even though technological acceleration threatens the ideological foundations that support the regime (cepa.org).

The deeper implication is that contemporary authoritarian systems are being pulled into modernity even as they resist it. Modernity is not a choice; it is a structural environment. No state can opt out of the global networked order without losing military and economic capacity. When regimes attempt to revive older models of power—territorial empire, mass mobilisation, centralised authority—they must still rely

on complex, fragile, modern infrastructures. This produces a self-defeating vector: ideology pushes backward, infrastructure pushes forward, and the resulting motion is unstable.

Russia's current trajectory exposes the limits of fighting modernity with pre-modern tools. The pressures of industrial-scale war require constant technological adaptation. The pressures of

ideological legitimacy require denial of that adaptation. These two demands cannot coexist indefinitely. The result is strain—economic, military, social, and political.

Modernity's trench is global. It shapes Russia as much as it shapes the liberal democracies it opposes. The more Russia resists the networked world, the more it must entangle itself within it to survive. This is not just a

Russian problem; it is a structural pattern of the 21st century. The tension between rigid ideology and fluid systems will define the next decades of geopolitics.

In the end, the paradox becomes unavoidable: Russia is fighting modernity while accelerating it. The state's attempt to resurrect a world of trenches, borders, and imperial destiny does not protect it from modernity—it

traps it inside modernity's logic. The war machine must modernise to function, even as its ideology insists on a return to the past. This contradiction will shape Russia's future, and perhaps determine its limits.